

**The Jewish Community of Johannesburg, 1886-1939:
Landscapes of Reality and Imagination**

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ABSTRACT

The Jewish community of Johannesburg has changed a great deal during the period 1886-1939. The majority of Jews arrived as peasants from the Pale of Settlement in Eastern Europe, where they faced degrading and difficult conditions. South Africa offered a safe haven free from religious persecution and full of the promise of economic prosperity. The greater part of Jewish immigrants settled in Johannesburg and created Jewish enclaves and districts on the cityscape, adding another dimension to the urban fabric. The Jewish community was not a homogenous entity and there were a number of points of disjunction around nationality, religious practice, political beliefs, and economic disparities. These differences were made physically manifest on the cityscape as different groups settled in different parts of the city. The places where the Jews settled, their spatial dimensions, characters, and life-spans are mapped for the entire period in order to provide a picture of the Jewish community during their first fifty years in Johannesburg. The Jewish schools, businesses, organizations, and synagogues have all been mapped and discussed. These Jewish areas have been likened to the *shtetls* of the Pale of Settlement from which the Jews came because of a variety of superficial similarities. The idea is contentious and is debated throughout the dissertation and arguments are presented against a number of commonly accepted ideas about South African Jewry and the nature of the *shtetl*. The work generally analyses the relationship between the reproduction of Jewish culture, tradition, and religion and the spaces that need to exist in order to facilitate this process. The recursive relationship that occurs forms the underlying framework which allows the geography of the Jewish community of Johannesburg to be mapped, examined, and understood. The dissertation is also an attempt to redress the paucity of geographical work that exists on ethnic communities within South African cities and pulls together a great deal of historical, demographic, and sociological work into one text that spans the first fifty years of Johannesburg's Jewish community.

OPSOMMING

Verskeie veranderinge het tussen 1886 en 1939 in die Joodse gemeenskap van Johannesburg plaasgevind. Die meeste Joodse immigrante het aangeland as kleinburgerlikes uit die *Pale of Settlement*-gebied in Oos Europa waar hulle moeilike en afbrekende toestande moes trotseer. Suid-Afrika was 'n veilige hawe vry van godsdienstige vervolging met baie potensiaal vir ekonomiese vooruitgang. Die grootste gedeelte van die Joodse immigrante het in Johannesburg gevestig en so het Joodse enklaves en distrikte in die stad ontstaan wat 'n nuwe dimensie aan die stadsstruktuur gegee het. Die Joodse gemeenskap was nie 'n homogene groep nie. Daar was etlike verskille in terme van nasionaliteit, godsdienstryk, politieke sienings en ekonomiese status. Hierdie verskille het ruimtelik gemanifesteer deurdat die onderskeie groepe in verskillende stadsgebiede gevestig het. Die vestigingsareas van die Jode, asook die ruimtelike dimensies, karakter en lewensduur daarvan is gekarteer ten einde 'n beeld te skep van die Joodse gemeenskap gedurende hul eerste vyftig jaar in Johannesburg. Alle Joodse skole, besighede, organisasies en sinagoge is gekarteer en bespreek. Bogenoemde Joodse areas is al dikwels vergelyk met die *shtetls* in die *Pale of Settlement* waarvandaan die Jode gekom het, aangesien daar 'n aantal oppervlakkige ooreenkomste is. Hierdie siening is egter aanvegbaar en word deurgaans saam met 'n aantal ander algemeen aanvaarde persepsies t.o.v. die Suid-Afrikaanse Jode en die aard van die *shtetl* gedebatteer. Die studie analiseer die verband tussen die reproduksie van die Joodse kultuur, tradisies en godsdienste en die ruimtelike vereistes wat nodig was om dit te fasiliteer. Die repeterende aard hiervan bied die geleentheid om die geografie van die Joodse gemeenskap te karteer, analiseer en verstaan. Die tesis poog ook om die tekort aan geografiese studies ten opsigte van etniese gemeenskappe binne Suid-Afrikaanse stede aan te vul. Heelwat historiese, demografiese en sosiologiese aspekte ten opsigte van die eerste vyftig jaar van Joodse vestiging in Johannesburg word hier saamgevat in een teks.

PREFACE

Memory softens the edges of reality, making it more acceptable, more romantic or interesting or sometimes simply less harsh than the truth of the situation. Over time details are glossed over and with repetition, fact fades into insignificance and fiction surreptitiously takes its place. Alternatively a weird hybrid is born, a strange combination part truth and part nostalgia. It is then that the process of extracting truth becomes even more difficult as the lines are blurred and the emerging narrative is neither a work of absolute fact nor of total fiction.

I grew up with these fascinating half-truths; folkstories and family legends set against the backdrop of the Johannesburg cityscape. A great-grandfather who owned an entire block of what is today Johannesburg's CBD and sold it for a few pounds when the city's early prospects floundered. A grandmother who came from a farm in the Free State to the flourishing Jewish community in Hillbrow, fell in love and stayed. Learning the names of the various Kosher butcheries and 'delis' and hearing their histories recalled over Friday night dinner, how, for example, Krystal's and Wachenheimer's had started in Doornfontein and the fate of their various family members. The descendants of these stories sat in class with me when I was at school, the lineages of various shops, synagogues, and people were deeply imprinted on my consciousness but the truth remained elusive.

The *shtetl*-like communities that I heard about in the stories of my family seemed impossibly good and although I could see, from my own experience, the way that the community seemed to live in such close proximity to each other, and was jokingly referred to as the 'ghetto' or *shtetl*, my geographic mind was constantly trying to understand why the urban morphology looked the way it did. I wanted to know if the stories were true and what on earth did a *shtetl* look like and were we really living in one. This research is my attempt to answer, at least, some of the questions that have dogged me for years.

I have examined the roots of the Jewish community, tried to identify where it comes from and what it looked like during its first 50 years on the Johannesburg landscape. Desperately attempting to separate fact and fiction - folklore from reality - in my endeavour to do so I have collected data that has allowed me to create a series of maps that graphically represent the distribution of the Jewish community. The data plotted on the maps depict the Jewish community of Johannesburg; its commercial districts, homes, places of worship, and recreation, and reveal how the patterns have changed over time. Part of this enterprise has been to argue that the so-called 'transplanted' *shtetl* is a myth, a part of a colourful and entertaining self-conception but hardly a geographical reality. I have also tried to examine and

explain the reasons why the community settled in the patterns that it did, striving to gain a deeper understanding of how the Jewish community changed, transformed, and/or influenced the city of Johannesburg and at the same time come to grips with both why and how they accomplished this. In a sense Johannesburg Jewry is being used to explore the nature of the relationship that exists between culture, ethnicity, and the physical environment.

The task has been a long one and there are many people who need to be thanked for their contributions to what turned out to be an undertaking of proportions greater than I had ever anticipated. It is at this point that various exceptional people must be acknowledged; Erika Pretorius from the University of Pretoria, Department of Geography, who helped in any number of ways too numerous to mention, Mrs. Musiker from the South African Board of Jewish Deputies (SABJD) archives, who shared her extensive knowledge and boundless enthusiasm, Andy and Andy from the *Chevrah Kadisha*, who let me share their office, Norma and Nellie from the SABJD Library, thank you for your patience and support, the Librarians at the William Cullen Library, University of the Witwatersrand, Ingrid Booysen and Magda Geringer of the University of Pretoria's cartography unit, whose help, advice, and skill was invaluable, Kathy Brookes at the Museum Africa for her help with the antique maps of Johannesburg, Marius van der Merwe from AfriGis, who is a gentleman and a scholar, Marcelle, Surlia, Marius, Rita, and Corrie from Johannesburg City Council, for the loan of vital information and the time taken to teach me how to use it. To my family (especially my new niece) and friends, your support and belief in me was unwavering, thanks for the advice, care, support, wine, and tranquillisers as the occasion demanded. Even when you were far away you were right by my side. To Prof. K.S.O. Beavon, (aka Prof. Koos), who has been my supervisor and mentor, my greatest critic and my most ardent supporter. There are no words (and yes, I have checked the Wordfinder) to say how much I appreciate everything that you have done for me. Thank you – you and Pat have been an inspiration.

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1st December 2004

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- Alte Afrikaners* - Jews who had come over to South Africa before 1890s or Jews who had managed to establish themselves very soon after arrivals, refers specifically to Jews of Eastern European origin.
- Ashkenasi* - term that refers to Jews of Eastern and Western European extraction.
- Bar Mitzvah* - ceremony by which a boy becomes a man in the eyes of Jewish law and the community and thus takes on the religious responsibilities of an adult in the community.
- Beth Din* - Jewish Ecclesiastical Court, the highest authority to which all religious and communal disputes are taken, also make decisions over the wellbeing of the community.
- Beth Midrash* - House of Learning, also refers to a place of prayer.
- Boereverneuers* - Afrikaans term referring to the racist stereotype of Jews as conmen and tricksters that swindled Afrikaners out of money.
- Bywooners* - is the Afrikaans term for sharecroppers who worked on other people's farms and were generally the poorest segment of the Afrikaner population. There was also an element of social welfare inherent in the relationship between farmers and the *bywooners*.
- Bund* - The General Jewish Workers Union was a socialist movement created in Lithuania in 1897.
- Cheder/im (pl)* - after school lessons in Hebrew and Jewish studies for young children.
- Common Era* - a non-denominational measure of time contemporaneous with the system using the birth of Jesus Christ as its starting point.
- Gemilut Chesed* - literally translated means 'Acts of loving kindness', refers to a charitable organisation established in Johannesburg in 1891.
- HaShem* - is the name used in secular texts to refer to G-d, the full name of G-d is reserved for spiritual and religious writing.
- Haskalah* - was an intellectual enlightenment movement that swept through Europe from the 1770s until the 1880s. It inspired rational consideration of religious texts and encouraged Jews to study secular topics and disciplines.

<i>Kosher</i>	- Jewish dietary law which details which foods can and cannot be eaten and the ways that the food should be prepared in order to make it ritually clean.
<i>Landrost</i>	- local government official in the ZAR.
<i>Landsmanschaften/ Landsleit societies</i>	- organisations established by people originating from the same Geographical areas, these were set up to provide support for new immigrants from Eastern Europe.
<i>Litvak</i>	- colloquial term for Jews originating from Lithuania.
<i>Melamed</i>	- Jewish studies or Hebrew teacher, always male.
<i>Peruvian</i>	- anti-Semitic term for Jews originating from Eastern Europe, origins of the term remains unclear.
<i>Pogrom</i>	- a violent attack on Jews or a Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe, resulting in the death and or injury of the inhabitants.
<i>Rabbi</i>	- Jewish religious and communal leader, attained through a series of academic examinations after years of study.
<i>Sephardi</i>	- Jews who are from Mediterranean countries such as Spain, Portugal, and South America.
<i>Shechichtah</i>	- Jewish ritual slaughtering of animals in the <i>Kosher</i> way.
<i>Shochet</i>	- a person trained in the ritual slaughter of animals and is qualified and certified by the Beth Din.
<i>Shtetl</i>	- 'Yiddish-speaking, provincial society, orthodox in its religious practice and traditional Jewish way of life' (Zemel, 1994: 194).
<i>Smous</i>	- itinerant peddler who supplied goods and services to farmers in the interior of South Africa.
<i>Talmud</i>	- the oral law passed down initially verbally and finally written down and captured in the Talmud.
<i>Talmud Torah</i>	- refers to the act of studying the Holy Texts of Judaism and can and should be enacted by men and women who are over the age of <i>Bar/Bat Mitzvah</i> , and are considered to be adults in the community. In the South African context it refers to the schools where people, including children preparing for their <i>Bar/Bat Mitzvah</i> ceremonies, could study Jewish lore
<i>Torah</i>	- the first five books of the Old Testament, making up the core of Jewish religious texts.

- Tzedakah* - charity and the responsibility of those who are able to help those who are in need. It is a religious obligation.
- Uitlander* - Afrikaans term for European people living in the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek* who were not of Afrikaans extraction.
- Uitvalgrond* - literally translated as left over land, meaning land that is not included in any official boundaries.
- Volksraad* - the parliament of the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek*.
- Yiddish* - Yiddish is a language comprised of German grammar, Aramaic, and Hebrew words, and contains a number of expressions from the Slavic languages.

LIST OF ACRONYMS
(used in the referencing systems)

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